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THE POWER OF THE SECOND QUESTION

Finding simple truths for complex lives



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For my son, Henry Skellett

2 May 1992–15 May 2013

Someone so true...

Henry lived his life as a young man ... in the present moment and in a world of activity, adventure and fun. Not for Henry the vacuous speculation of an older man. His dad was too full of waffle. I took it upon myself to keep me honest and grounded as I wrote this book. It is such a shame that I didn't live long enough to see the finished product. I would have valued his opinion of it above the opinion of all others.

He was truly wise beyond his years.

Preface

Every so often we come across a simple truth that makes a personal connection for us. It could be a familiar quote or saying. It could be a politician's catch phrase or a family motto. Sometimes it comes naively from the mouth of an innocent child. Or it could be simple advice from a friend. Sometimes it's a comedian's wicked one-liner.

These simple truths capture complex issues in a single phrase; reflecting the world as we see it. It resonates with us.

When this happens, we experience an 'aha' moment. We have gained insight or perhaps experienced a transformational moment. Suddenly we realise something about life that we probably already knew but hadn't fully acknowledged. This is a personal 'light bulb' moment and we become wiser as a result.

Each of us carries a collection of personal 'truths' about our world, our relationships and ourselves. They help us make sense of the business of being alive. They are often derived from our life experience, but they are also handed down to us by the people that we have known or know. They are subjective beliefs that organise the way that we see the world.

But how often do we take the time to reflect and consider the full depth and breadth of our 'personal wisdom'? We are so busy living life in the moment that we rarely make time to pull up and see the bigger picture. Our accumulated experience inevitably makes us wiser as individuals but, generally, we tend not to appreciate how far we have come.

The Power of the Second Question is about creating the opportunity to pause, to reflect and consider exactly who we are. To affirm what we value in life and what general principles guide our behaviour. It asks us to consider what lessons we have learned as we have travelled life's journey, and what our wise legacy should be. This book is about finding ways to see a bigger picture, to help us discover the meaning and sense of purpose in our lives.

And how can we see the bigger picture? How can we extract a wiser perspective on our world?

By asking good thought-provoking questions of ourselves, we can pause, take a breath and reflect more expansively about life. We also need to set aside time to encourage this habit.

As we grow older we become wiser naturally. This is because we do less and we think more. This cognitive shift towards reflection becomes increasingly relevant and important to us as we age. As a result, we can see patterns repeating themselves. We listen to the stories of others and we react with a more measured, less emotional response. The specific details of a situation become less important. Instead, we become more interested in distilling the essential message from a story and finding a broader coherence. We become 'detached observers' or commentators on the life that goes on around us. Experience also allows us to become more accepting and philosophical about life.

Knowing a little more about life is about learning to know more about ourselves and our core beliefs. This enables us to live a more authentic life, without feeling constricted by the opinions of others. We become our own person and we carry a more defined personal compass that gives direction to our lives. But this is not an automatic process and it is easy to drift rather aimlessly through life. To reset that compass we sometimes need to ask challenging questions of ourselves; questions that elicit a personal wisdom. These questions are known as 'second questions'. In *The Power of the Second*

Question we will learn how to ask them and how to extract greater wisdom from both ourselves and from those around us.

The Power of the Second Question invites you to lift up from the practicalities of everyday life and consider the bigger picture. To think about who you are, what you have learned, and where you are going.

How to use this book

You probably bought this book and intended to keep it clean and pristine. You will try not to mark the pages or bend the spine. Although you will be asked to write in the book and complete exercises you may well hold back, reluctant to spoil the freshness of the book. This is how we usually treat the books we buy.

However, this book isn't like that. It's a book to engage with, to interact with and to scribble in. This is *your book*, and not one to be lightly shared with others. It is the opportunity for you to reflect upon your life, and to pull together key insights about who *you* are, what you stand for, and what you value in this wonderful business of being alive.

This is a workbook. I encourage you to scrawl in it, to jot down insights and thoughtful ideas in the margins. Feel free to dog-ear special pages. To jump around in it and come back to different sections time and time again. Think about the questions that appeal to you or challenge you, making time to reflect on them. The more you batter this book, the richer you will become.

I once counselled a client who worked in a book bindery. As a farewell gift, she gave me a beautifully bound leather book with my name etched in gold lettering down the spine. It was a fantastic gift which I treasured. I initially planned to use my beautifully bound book to write a factual history of my life, one page per year, but the task seemed to be too overwhelmingly complex to know quite where to begin. Somehow the project lacked passion, and it didn't seem to capture the essence of who I was. It may have told others what I'd done in my life, but it wouldn't tell them what I'd learned. Or what I valued. Or what life was all about for me.

My beautiful book, so highly valued, deserved something better. It needed more spark. I realised that I would far prefer to use it to collate my personal insights, my treasured stories, and my favourite quotes into one specific place. I also wanted to add photos, news clippings, and favourite cartoons. In short, I wanted to create a personal statement that captured the essential highlights of my life, my personal learnings and the key ideas that underpinned my world view. The empty pages were to become the blank canvas for my personal reflections, and they would eventually stand as my legacy for others to enjoy.

I suggest that you buy a book of empty pages for yourself. It could be anything from a simple school exercise book to a special leather-bound copy like mine. Either way, get hold of a book that is full of blank pages. Then set aside time to transcribe your insights, your simple truths and your wisdom from *The Power of the Second Question*. Arrange them as you wish. But find ways to capture who you are, what you stand for and what life is all about for you. Pull together all the wise words you have ever heard and all the insights that you have gained. The lyrics of favourite songs, pictures of personal significance, and cartoons that capture an issue perfectly for you. Record the collection of simple truths that speak for you.

It will become *your book*. A book that represents who you truly are.

Introduction

We all live from day to day. We eat, we sleep and we exercise, and then we repeat the pattern all over again. We laugh. We have fun. We get things done. Sometimes, it's good, sometimes it's not so good. But we trudge on regardless, taking each day as it comes.

As our lives unfold, we all know, deep down, that there is something more to life; a deeper, more insightful level of awareness that we never quite seem to have the time to access. Occasionally we might hear an intriguing comment or we suddenly realise something that seems quite profound, but then we push on with the issues of the day, and the transient insight slips quietly away.

How hard is it for us to pause and reflect about what really matters in our lives? We really owe it to ourselves to stop and be more appreciative of the opportunities for insight that life has provided. We need to pause ... and we need to reflect.

Why is this so important? Our individual behaviour is governed largely by unwritten rules about life that we learn along the way. We evolve general truths about how the world seems to operate and we are guided by a set of vaguely articulated personal values. We decide who to trust, and what to believe, and we shape our own definitions of success. We define what constitutes a personally fulfilling life and we generate simple guidelines to help us achieve it.

By doing this we accumulate a personal set of *subjective truths* that underpin the way that we see the world. These truths are the core beliefs that come to define who we are.

Core beliefs are created by taking a rather selective view of how the world functions. When core beliefs clash between people, they are the primary drivers of wars. When they align, they are the fundamental ingredients of love.

Dr Foster's Good Question

Several years ago I was visited by the father of a good friend of mine. He used to be my family doctor when I was a child, but it was a retired, kindly figure in his late eighties who approached me, leaning heavily on a walking stick and cupping one hand behind his ear to hear me speak.

On shaking my hand firmly, he fixed me with a steely eye and asked, 'Chris, what have you been doing since I saw you last?'

'Well,' I replied proudly, 'for the last 25 years I've been working as a clinical psychologist.'

'Good Lord,' he replied, 'And over all that time, *what have you learned about people?*'

I was totally stumped for a reply! The daunting size of the question completely overwhelmed me. In 25 years of clinical practice, I had never stopped to think about this. No one had ever asked me such a question before and I had never stopped to ask the question of myself.

A whole range of useless comments sprang to mind, but essentially I was totally ill-equipped to offer Dr Foster any significant wisdom from my accumulated experience. Despite many years of incredible conversations with a huge range of thoughtful clients, I had never stopped to distil my key insights or to collect my broader thoughts about what I had learned.

Dr Foster's Good Question gave me the initial impetus to write this book. It was the start of

thoughtful, integrative period of my life where I started to value the wisdom of my experience, and use it as a powerful companion to my knowledge and formal training. I also realised that good therapy is not really about giving wise advice, but instead providing clients with the opportunity to find their own 'simple truths', and to gain fundamental shifts in perspective that help them move forward. In short, my role essentially was to ask them good, thought-provoking questions.

More importantly, I also realised that *we don't need to be in therapy* to reflect usefully upon our lives. For all of us, the habit of asking ourselves good, penetrating questions is an essential part of living life well. *The Power of the Second Question* gives you the opportunity to do just that.

The power of a second question

Let's look more closely at the role of these expansive questions that can elicit profound 'aha' moments. We call them 'second questions' because they usually follow on from a series of factual questions that simply exchange information. Second questions are qualitatively different from the more frequently asked factual questions. They provide an extra dimension to a conversation. They lift us up. They open a door. They are usually big picture, conceptual questions that require the responder to pause and consider before they reply. They make us think more expansively, often on topics that we haven't previously considered, and they challenge us to declare a personal wisdom.

Practical examples of second questions in action

In therapy

Clinical psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors are all adept at using good questions to elicit 'aha' moments. They are taught to create 'transformational' insights in their clients in this way.

As a therapist, you know when you've asked a good question in a therapy conversation. There's a thoughtful pause from the client, a moment of reflection, and possibly a deep sigh before they provide a simple, often profound response. The answer often reveals a dramatic and fundamental change in their world view. Once they experience this change, possibilities open up to explore new ways of thinking and of overcoming problems.

Examples of these broad insights might be:

- I'm looking back. I need to look forward.
- I'm not a victim, I'm a survivor.

In therapy, clients learn to reconceptualise their situation in a way that empowers them and leads them forward. A new truth arrives that dramatically transforms their world view. It usually arrives after about half an hour of apparently idle chat and in response to a good question.

In celebrity interviews

We can also see the power of a good question when watching celebrity interviews on television. A film star might be being interviewed about their latest movie. They might be asked about what it's like to live in Hollywood. Or what it's like to work with a certain petulant co-star. And then, almost

without fail, the interviewer will ask a powerful second question.

The conversation will seem to shift gear. The interviewer will pause and collect themselves before asking something more ‘big picture’ or something more abstract. They will ask an overarching question that invites the respondent to share an insight and the question usually elicits a surprising degree of wisdom from the interviewee.

For example, they may ask: ‘Overall, what do you think is the key quality of a good actor?’

Again we see the pause, the sigh and the moment of reflection before a simple truth is revealed.

The reply might be that ‘It’s all about the ability to connect with the audience,’ or ‘It’s all about being authentic, and truly believing in the character.’

It was the power of the second question that drew the wisdom from them.

Different actors will answer the question differently, but at the end of the day, they will each be offering their personal wisdom about the industry. They will be offering a subjective truth that tells us more about them as people. And of greater interest here, we can see that they may not even have been aware of their wisdom until they spoke it.

In the classroom

Good teachers do not simply teach facts; they also ask good questions. Telling children what the three main functions of a river are is both useful and informative, but *asking* them to think about what the three main functions of a river might be will add significantly to the process. By asking good questions, the children are encouraged to think critically, encouraged to ‘own’ their answers, and able to access internalised wisdom that they perhaps didn’t even realise they had.

Their answers are based on a broader consideration of life than simply the topic in hand. They are obliged to pull up from the detail and to draw upon their experiences in life so far. They look for general rules drawn from the wider world, and then apply them to a specific question. They are obliged to look within themselves for their personal wisdom.

In business consulting

A landscape gardening consultant recently visited my daughter Lucy and her husband to help plan a garden for their new home. Initially the consultant asked a series of practical questions about the garden, enquiring about the dimensions, soil type and gradient. Then she suddenly shifted gear. ‘And what is the key image that you’re looking for in your garden?’ she asked. ‘How would you describe the garden that you want to own?’

The whole tone of the conversation had dramatically changed. She was now asking them second questions. They were suddenly obliged to look deep within themselves to find the answers. They were not expected to be told how it was going to be. Instead, they were being asked how they’d like it to be. A enforced period of surprisingly thoughtful and empowering reflection ensued.

Asking second questions of yourself

For you to become more aware of who you are and what you stand for, there needs to be a opportunity to reflect thoughtfully on yourself. The challenge is to pull together all of your subjective

wisdom into a simple framework that highlights your key learnings and empowers you. Essentially, know yourself better.

Self-reflection is a naturally occurring phenomenon. It occurs when we drive, when we lie in the bath or as we wait for a bus or an appointment. These enforced moments of 'time out' in our busy lives provide wonderful opportunities to briefly reflect upon ourselves. We can pull up from the business of responding to the immediate demands of the day and instead consider the bigger picture. 'What am I doing?' 'Where am I going?' And to clarify what's really important to us.

The problem with these fleeting opportunities is that they are usually interrupted by mundane events, and they rarely bring us to a satisfying conclusion or to a nuggety 'truth'. Unstructured self-reflection tends to be an exercise in worrying away at an issue, rather like a dog with a bone. Our minds go round and round without being led systematically to a concluding insight. We indulge in the activity of reflection without achieving a satisfying outcome. We tend to simply drift.

Often our personal reflections are based on a current worry (financial, health or work-related) and we simply ruminate endlessly about the facts. It is only when we discuss our worry with someone and have a structured conversation that we can move on. Hopefully our confidante will ask us good 'second questions' to help us start thinking.

For example, the accountant might ask us what our spending priorities are, the doctor might ask us what we need to change about our lives in order to improve our health and the boss might ask us what would make our work life more rewarding. These questions all lift up the conversation from the plain facts and prompt big picture reflection, helping you come up with an action plan based on an 'ah-ha' moment.

The Power of the Second Question will help you to start thinking about your own second question and how you can find a greater depth and sense of fulfilment in life. Not only will this self-wisdom enrich your own life, but it will also help you elicit wisdom in those around you. You can learn how to invite children, partners, colleagues and friends to access their own wisdom, and to become more thoughtful and self-aware. In effect, you will learn how to lift up the level of conceptual awareness of others by inviting them to share a broader perspective with you.

Asking second questions of others is the absolute foundation of good teaching, good mentoring and good parenting. It is a hugely affirming skill that correlates highly with maturity and wisdom.

Dr Foster asked me a powerful second question during his visit to me. He obliged me to stop and think conceptually about what I had learned in my professional life so far. He forced me to pause and to reflect on my key learnings. And when we are invited to lift up our thinking in this way, we are essentially being shown a fascinating pathway towards increased self-awareness.

It's a challenging path, but one that is well worth exploring.

Chapter One

REFLECTION, WISDOM AND INSIGHT

Reflection

The word ‘reflection’ means *to look back*, as if we are looking into a mirror or seeing our reflection in a pool of water. We are looking at ourselves as if from the outside. We are observing ourselves with a degree of detached curiosity. We are conducting a brief, objective review of our lives.

And sometimes when we look in the mirror, instead of just guiding the razor or applying some make-up, we might catch ourselves in the moment. We stop, we stare and we wonder just who is the person gazing so intently back at us?

In our quieter moments we all tend to become more reflective, thinking back over the day and pondering recent events. Usually we are looking back and reviewing facts, remembering what has happened and sorting the events into a coherent story.

Reflection usually occurs during the pauses in our lives, especially after an event has finished. Driving home from work, finishing reading a book or having a quiet glass of wine at the end of the day are all situations where we might drift into idle thought.

When we give ourselves a moment to stop *doing*, we can shift into a more detached state of *being*. We can be reflective, and we can passively dissect the day. The more ‘in the moment’ we are, the more reflective we become. Whether watching a sunset or gazing into an open fire, we all tend to become more aware of the bigger picture in our lives. We look for meaning, patterns or a sense of higher purpose.

We can all find ways to deliberately schedule more opportunities for reflection in our daily lives. We can keep a journal or diary, and choose a bath rather than a shower. Taking a regular walk at the end of the day is another simple way to unwind and reflect on the bigger picture. The habit of purposeful self-reflection is a skill that sets wise folk apart from the rest.

Holidays, funerals and school reunions—times for reflection

There are many opportunities for us to take the time out for more serious reflection. These are the times when we take the opportunity to stop, sit back and consider the bigger picture. They are times when we are struck by the broader sweep of our lives, and when we can access a deeper sense of personal awareness.

On holiday, it often takes a few days for the practical, everyday concerns to slip away and lose their significance. We stop texting or checking emails. We stop worrying about lists of things that we have to do. Instead, we start to ponder on the nature of life, on distant memories or on future dreams. Our minds have become untethered and we tend to speculate more broadly on expansive issues.

At funerals, we sit and we remember. In our grief we are lifted up from everyday

preoccupations and our thoughts range freely across broader landscapes. We enter a spiritual realm. We hear wonderfully succinct insights from speakers about aspects of the deceased and about the meaning of life. More importantly, for everyone at the service, this is also an opportunity to reflect at a personal level. It is another opportunity for big-picture thinking.

Finally, at school reunions, we usually find ourselves cringing at the effects of advancing age on our peer group. We trade competitive anecdotes and facts, and we see who's done well in life and who's fallen by the wayside. But behind the tittle-tattle of awkward interchanges, there lies opportunity. Firstly, it's a great opportunity to ask second questions of each other. But more importantly, on the way home, it's an even greater opportunity to reflect personally on the grander sweep of our lives—and to ask second questions of ourselves.

Reflection is a way of accessing a sense of wisdom in life. If we don't stop to reflect, then we simply trundle through the events that we experience without pause for thought, without assimilating what we have learned. We are little better than sheep, grazing with their noses firmly pressed to the ground for the entire duration of their life. And when they look up from the grass, they are simply looking for more grass.

There are naturally occurring moments of enforced big-picture reflection in life, usually *following adversity* when life comes to a crashing halt. Painful loss inevitably brings the burden of grief and renewed search for purpose and meaning in life. In the eerie calm following a tragedy, we often experience profound insights about what is really important to us and what we truly value.

These life-changing insights also occur during those *exhilarating moments of joy*, when time seems to stand still. At the birth of a child or when we see the tail fluke of a diving whale against a picture-perfect sunset, we simply gaze in awe at the richness of life. We feel that we are in touch momentarily with something profound. We sense that there must be some kind of inherent message in the experience that connects us to a fundamental truth in life. We must grasp these opportunities with both hands whenever they occur.

Wisdom—more than just knowledge

We live in a world that sets a premium on information. It's a world of facts and figures. We learn facts from our parents, from TV and from our schooling through to university. The more that you know, the cleverer you seem.

It's a world that rarely seeks the *integrative overview*. These days society seems hell-bent on dumbing us down to a world of superficial facts. It is the exception rather than the rule when we are presented with a conceptual analysis of a problem. We live in a world where the media prefer to simply detail factual events, rather than to provide a contextual overview. We are served a diet of facts rather than concepts; information rather than ideas.

However, just knowing facts is only a part of the story. As we develop in our various roles we accumulate additional wisdom through our experience of life. This wisdom through experience cannot be taught; it cannot be formally learned.

Einstein once suggested that 'Learning is experience. Everything else is just information'. In this way, wisdom can be seen as the true knowledge that is gained through experience.

He also said, ‘When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking. It was the ability to ask “What if?”’

In this way Einstein shows us that imagination and speculation beat factual knowledge every time in the quest for genuine wisdom.

Wisdom is usually associated with increasing age, but we all carry a unique personal wisdom regardless of our practical knowledge or life stage. Maturity does not necessarily equate with years of experience, but more often with time spent in thoughtful reflection. We often speak of young people carrying a wisdom beyond their years.

In many ways, the essence of this book is for each reader to access their own wisdom, and to achieve greater clarity about how the world operates through their own experience. However brief, however limited, and however tedious our lives might seem to us, we will all have had the opportunity to learn some profound lessons along the way.

We have not just experienced life – we have understood life.

Conventional champions of wisdom include philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Sophia and Confucius. Socrates is famously quoted by Plato as saying that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’, while another popular quote from ancient Greece (often attributed to Socrates) is the exhortation to ‘know thyself’. Both of these comments emphasise the central role that self-awareness has to play in developing your personal wisdom.

Philosophers tend to distil their wisdom from one of two approaches; the *contemplative* and the *prudential* traditions.

Contemplative traditions, as used frequently by monks and nuns on retreat, emphasise reflection and meditation as the pathway to enlightenment. Conversely, *prudential traditions* emphasise the philosophical processes of logic that help us arrive at a considered opinion. We are asked to ‘think our way to a simple truth through deductive reasoning.

The book that you are now holding sits firmly in the *contemplative* corner of philosophical tradition. Discovering our personal wisdom does not require us to train in logical analysis or metaphysical reasoning. We are simply required to reflect quietly and to allow the insights to fall out of the silence that we have created for ourselves. A series of gentle second questions, asked quietly of ourselves, should be all that we need to find wisdom.

Finally, it should also be noted that there is much to be learned from *spiritual* guides, and from classic texts such as the Bible, the Qur’an, or scriptures drawn from Taoist or Buddhist traditions. Spiritual enlightenment continues to be the most common pathway that people use when formally seeking big picture wisdom. Here, many second questions are asked in the search for purpose and meaning in our lives.

The wisdom that we seek in this way extends far beyond simple knowledge. It represents a profound sense of personal fulfilment. We don’t just know things about life – we understand things about life.

Insight

Insight can be defined as a sudden understanding or a new perception of a complex situation. It involves a paradigm shift from *old think* to *new think*. We have all experienced moments of insight when, as a child, we ‘understood’ how to ride a bike or how to stand up or how to say ‘Mama’. The

‘aha’ moments usually serve as markers of significant developmental milestones in our lives. Something has changed and we are the wiser for it.

Wisdom often comes to us in specific moments of insight when we suddenly realise a new simple truth that helps us make sense of the world. We gain a deeper understanding of life as a result. A ‘lightbulb’ comes on and we are bathed in the illuminating moment.

There are many classic references to important, insightful moments in history. For example:

- When the Flat Earth Society realised that the world was round.
- When St Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus.
- When Archimedes shouted ‘Eureka’ in the bath.

These are all well-documented occasions when light-bulb moments occurred. When ‘the penny dropped’ and when fundamental shifts in thinking occurred. These are the times when certain individuals realised something profound about the world and ‘new truths’ were established for the benefit of us all.

When we watch a detective thriller on TV, we often find that, towards the end, we suddenly realise that it wasn’t the butler, but it was the gardener who killed the maid. All our previous assumptions about who was telling the truth are suddenly thrown into doubt. Along with the investigating officer we surge along on an excitable wave of energy born of the ‘aha’. With our new assumptions and conclusions we see the world more clearly and it all makes greater sense.

Similarly, when we have a problem to solve, we struggle with the issue before a sudden realisation comes to us. We can see a way forward. We have an ‘aha’. Whether we are trying to work out why the car won’t start or how the DVD player operates, we all experience a mini ‘aha’ moment as we find the solution. Even remembering where you left your mobile phone usually involves a triumphant ‘aha’.

These moments of sudden insight are often exquisite. They are the glitter and sparkle that light up our lives and drive the central theme of this book.

‘Aha’ moments are often delightful, almost magical experiences. They are always the product of healthy curiosity, when an individual bothers to ask themselves clever questions in a search for a fresh perspective on their world. These expansive questions open new doors for us and as these doors reveal new vistas and insights, we can only gasp a knowing ‘aha’ in response.

Think of the excitable energy that accompanies parlour games such as charades or twenty questions. A small gathering of close family or friends will delight in collectively working its way towards a dawning realisation. Their progress is rarely linear. More often than not, after many false starts, a good question will suddenly elicit a collective ‘aha’ and everyone races joyously to the unveiling of the answer.

Finding insight is always satisfying. It is associated with a proud sense of achievement and learning something new. It is not possible to have that flash of excitement without feeling energised and affirmed. This feeling can make ‘aha’ experiences extremely addictive. We are drawn to the intoxicating ‘high’ of the final reveal.

Remembering a personal ‘aha’ moment

Think back to a time when you experienced a major realisation in your life. A time when you had

a transformational shift from feeling stuck to experiencing a surge of energy that propelled you forward. Perhaps it was a time when you decided to resign from a job or when you suddenly realised that you were free to make your own decisions. Describe it briefly below:

Sit back and remember that feeling of lightness associated with the change. Was it a sense of relief tinged with excitement? The feeling that somehow you had opened a new door and that you now had a deeper understanding of who you were and what life was all about.

In his recent e-book, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*, Daniel Goleman gives a fascinating account of the neurophysiology of an 'aha' moment. If you measure brainwaves during a creative moment, it turns out that there is intense gamma activity before the answer comes to you. Gamma activity indicates the binding together of neurons as a new association emerges. Immediately after that gamma spike, the new idea enters our consciousness.

This heightened activity during an insight focuses on the right temporal region. This is the same area of the brain that interprets metaphor and 'gets' jokes. It understands 'the language of poems, of art, and of myth'. It's the platform for dreams, where anything goes and the impossible seems possible.

The best way to mobilise this activity is to first concentrate intently on a problem and then relax. If you try to force an insight, as we all know, you will usually stifle the opportunity for a creative breakthrough.

Letting go is characterised by a high alpha rhythm, which signals mental relaxation, a state of openness, of daydreaming and drifting, where we're more receptive to new ideas. This sets the stage for the novel connections that occur during the gamma spike.

And when that moment of creativity occurs, we invariably experience a physical sensation of pleasure. We have our moment of joy and an ecstatic release. Gamma spikes are fun! They come out of nowhere and they bring a welcome vitality into our lives.

The spark that drives creativity

Elaine was the intelligent, personable director of a large academic program. During a particularly thought-provoking coaching session, we discussed a number of potential coaching goals to build

greater creativity into her leadership role.

After some thoughtful discussion Elaine decided that she needed to:

- make more space for creativity in her work
- value and notice the power of creativity
- seek out more creative opportunities in her daily routines.

With a deep sigh, Elaine told me that creativity was the key factor that inspired her in life. She needed to nurture and enhance its role in the otherwise tedious list of roles and responsibilities that she held.

And just when I thought that we had reached a satisfying conclusion to our discussion, Elaine went on to add one further realisation:

‘It seems to me that the spark behind all creativity is that magical moment of insight. That moment when you suddenly leap to an exciting new perspective on the familiar. I just love that feeling!’

Elaine was identifying a driving force behind her love of her work, and of life itself. She carried an unrelenting curiosity and search for new meaning that brought energy and vitality to her life. It was a perfect summary of the added joy that ‘aha’ moments can bring to our lives.

‘Aha’ moments are the key to the evolution of our civilisation. Just when we think that the world has plateaued and that things are settled, along comes another ‘aha’ or bright spark to help us jump forward. The invention of the wheel, of the internet, and the splitting of the atom inevitably involved personal ‘aha’ moment for someone that propelled us all collectively forward towards the next evolutionary phase.

Inventions occur when someone is not satisfied with how things are and asks how things could be better. This is how technological evolution occurs and how social change comes about. One person asks a good question, experiences an ‘aha’, and then shares it with the world.

My five greatest insights

Insights are snappy, succinct one-liners that make immediate sense to you. They remind you of a personal truth in a concise and powerful way. They are inherently *wise*.

Write down as many simple one-line insights that you can remember having about life. For example, you may have suddenly realised that ‘the more that I give, the more I receive’. Or that ‘courage and fear go hand in hand’.

These one-liners might not come to you immediately, but you can always come back to your list and jot down ideas as you move through this book. Record your five favourite one-liners below:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Insights are true nuggets of wisdom. They resonate strongly with your core values and beliefs, and provide wonderful foundation stones for constructing a coherent world view.

Summary

The modern world keeps us hooked on a diet of factual information, providing few invitations for us to reflect upon the bigger picture. Life is fast and we are not encouraged to stop and reflect on our experiences. We are all too busy doing practical things to contemplate more expansive ideas.

Increasingly, our social communication is pitched at the level of facts rather than ideas. We ask each other about the kids, about work and about recent events, but we rarely lift up conversations to consider more abstract ideas and concepts. And worse, we rarely bother to pause and ask ourselves what we've learned about life so far, or to notice how 'wise' we have become in our relatively brief time on the planet.

Everyone can reflect. Everyone can be wise. And everyone can have insights. It's actually a very simple formula to experience all this, but it requires us to use personal initiative to do so. If we make the time to reflect and ask challenging questions of ourselves, then more than likely we shall find satisfying answers. Increased personal wisdom becomes our reward.

Chapter Two

TECHNIQUES FOR TRADING WISDOM

When we think back to Dr Foster's Good Question (*What have you learned about people?*) we have the starting point for a wide range of useful questions to ask. We are moving from asking specific, factual questions about details, to asking for an 'executive summary' or an overview. We are changing gear.

Second questions are designed to elicit abstract ideas. They are conceptual by nature and they seem expansive. But rather than inviting the respondent to talk at length on a wide range of topics, they instead require them to come up with a simple, almost factual summary statement. And for this reason they tend to distil their answers down to essential take-home 'truths'.

Socratic questioning

Socrates was a very wise man; perhaps one of the wisest men who ever lived. But his greatest contribution to philosophy was not his knowledge as such; rather it was his ability to ask good questions of others.

People would travel great distances to sit at his feet. They would come with questions or issues that they needed to be addressed. But they would not receive advice or answers to their questions. Instead Socrates would reply by asking a good question of his own. He would ask a question that elicited an insight from the questioner. Essentially, he was inviting the person to find the answer to their own question.

By asking a thought-provoking question, Socrates was effectively holding up a mirror. By asking a logical series of questions, he would lead people to find their own 'aha' moment or insight about the way forward. They would be discovering wisdom within themselves of which they had been previously unaware. This was Socrates' greatest gift.

These days, Socratic questioning is a very popular mentoring style, found widely across all sectors of society. Often it happens naturally, for example, when interacting with children. Sometimes it needs to be a little more deliberate and structured, such as when teaching teenagers to consider the risks of certain socially exciting opportunities. It is far better to ask what the risks are if they stay or leave, rather than to simply list the dangers for them.

During a formal de-briefing after a sporting event, a coach might ask players, 'And what have you learned from the game this afternoon?' Emergency services will also de-brief in a similar way after a callout. The team leader will elicit a critical review by asking the team what they thought they did well, what could have gone better and what else they might try next time. The team will be doing all the thinking. The leader is simply eliciting the ideas from them by asking good questions.

This process of inducing wisdom in others through asking good questions has now become the cornerstone of many professional interactions.

Socratic questioning is obviously a very common method in teaching. Instead of *telling*

schoolchildren about some aspect of life, a teacher will *ask* them. If they struggle to find a reply, the series of supplementary questions will gradually guide them to find the answer.

In this way schoolchildren are led to find their own answers, which they subsequently embrace their own. They also learn to think critically along the way.

Teachers are encouraged to ask questions in a progressive series that lift up students' replies from the level of simple knowledge, to explore comprehension as a higher form of learning outcome. Each of these levels of questioning will induce a greater sense of wisdom in the student, as they search and find the answers within themselves rather than simply reiterating learned facts.

Clinical psychologists will also use Socratic questioning to systematically uncover a client's distressing pattern of thought. They will ask a series of 'why' questions until a key 'underlying assumption' is reached that underpins the negative thinking. The idea is that a whole range of negative thoughts emanates from a core dysfunctional belief that feels true to the client, but is not helpful to them. By holding up a mirror to invite reflection, the psychologist induces a transformational 'ah-ha' moment for the client and new insight is gained.

All therapy techniques can be seen as attempts to induce a new 'wisdom' for the client. Invariably, by asking challenging questions, we will promote thoughtful reflection with a consequent realisation that things could be different.

An external business consultant will use a very similar questioning process to induce change. The consultant will usually know very little about the company's business, but will be skilled at asking the right questions. They will almost deliberately adopt the position of a naive enquirer.

The process is the same, but the language is intriguingly different. While psychologists like to conceptualise their questions as leading their client 'downwards' towards an underlying core insight, business consultants prefer the notion of 'lifting up' the analysis to a conceptual overview. They talk about 'helicopter views' and 'blue skies' visioning. They like to see over the horizon and, in general, use far more expansive metaphors in their work. They talk about stepping back and working 'on' the business rather than 'in' the business.

They will ask questions such as:

- If we could look down on your business from on high, what would we see?
- If we could fast forward to five years from now, where would we be?
- If we could dream of a perfect world, what would your business look like?

The core technique is to *ask good questions* that provoke insight and wisdom, rather than to *give good advice*. This is the essence of the Socratic method.

Delivering wisdom to the farm gate

Murray was a salesman/farm advisor who travelled around rural areas reviewing farming practices with local farmers. As they leaned on the gate they would talk about all manner of things, but mostly facts. They would discuss stock prices, legislative change and the weather. Essentially, Murray was there to make a sale, but he was bored.

Somehow Murray needed to lift up the level of conversation for his work to become more stimulating and less repetitive. He wanted to know what really motivated and inspired his clients. We decided that all he really needed to do was to ask!

- What makes farming such a fulfilling role for you?
- Why are you so passionate about farming?
- What's the most inspiring thing that's happened since we last met?
- What do you think is the key attribute of a good farmer?

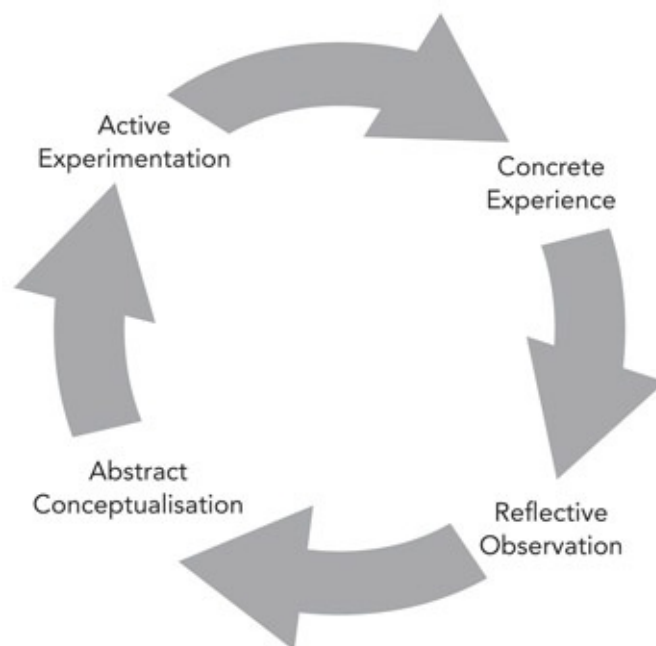
The list of Murray's second questions went on and on. Lifting up from the facts and wheeling around some big-picture topics gave significantly more grunt to the conversations. The sense of connection was stronger, and the genuine interest in his customers' replies gave a greater authenticity to Murray's visits. Suddenly both parties were looking forward to the next visit. Murray was no longer just selling farm products, he was trading ideas.

Kolb's Learning Cycle

In recent years it has become very popular to conceptualise a series of reflective questions as a cycle. These are sometimes called *learning conversations* and are based on a simple model initially proposed by David Kolb in 1984. The cycle describes the basic technique for trading wisdom and extracting wise 'ahas' from others. When applied as a process of self-reflection, it becomes a powerful technique for discovering personal insights.

Kolb proposed that experiential learning can be conceptualised in a four-stage *learning cycle* outlined below. Initially drawn from an educational setting, it has been widely applied to a huge range of clinical and business development processes.

The learning process involves moving around the circle asking a series of deliberate questions usually starting at the *concrete experience* stage. This involves the teacher/mentor/therapist/supervisor asking for a factual account of what happened. It might concern a specific problem or troubling theme in life.



KOLB'S LEARNING CYCLE

Once this has been clearly and objectively described, we move on to the *reflective observation*

stage. Here, we reflect on the context of the event and the meaning or function that it might have for our lives.

We then move on to the *abstract conceptualisation* stage, where we extract the simple truths and nuggety learnings that help us carry forward a generically useful insight. This is the stage where the powerful second questions are asked and genuine wisdom is induced.

Finally we move to the *active experimentation* stage where the new conceptualisation is tested out in the real world. This usually takes the form of a ‘homework’ exercise.

At each stage of this logical process, structured questions are used to carry the student/client/supervisee around the circle. Once completed, the cycle starts again.

Examples of good questions at each stage of the cycle include:

- Concrete experience: What happened? Who was involved?
- Reflective observation: What is the pattern? What were the triggers?
- Abstract conceptualisation: What can you learn from all this? What does it mean for you?
- Active experimentation: How can you test out your new idea?

It is critically important to note that this cycle is driven by a series of questions, and by the questions alone. Under no circumstances should the mentor break rank and ‘give advice’ to the supervisee. Although at times it might seem frustrating in the extreme to let people come slowly to their own answers when the answer seems obvious to the questioner, we must never become *prescriptive*. Although it often seems quicker to just tell others what to do and jump to suggesting an answer, it steals the moment for self-discovery.

Kolb’s Learning Cycle provides a great structure to drive the Socratic method described earlier. We move from asking factual questions (*What happened?*) to a series of second questions (*How does this fit into your life? What does it mean?*), and then finally we ask a very practical type of question again (*What will you do?*).

When we are trying to put structure into our own self-reflection, we should use this process to help us come to an insightful conclusion. All too often when we indulge in reflection, we simply ruminate endlessly about the factual event. We drift off into unstructured and vacuous ‘if only’ or ‘what ifs’ but never seem to extract the core insights. Nor do we evolve a practical plan for moving forward.

You can use the panel below to address a simple problem in your own life by using the learning cycle:

Using Kolb’s Learning Cycle to guide your self-reflection

Think about a simple problematic event that has occurred recently in your life. Or it could be a recurrent issue that is troubling you.

- What is the problem?
-

- What is the wider issue?
-
-

- What is the key learning in this for you?
-
-

- What can you do differently next time?
-
-

Notice how the series of structured questions leads you to both a personal insight (a key learning) and a practical plan for change.

Reasoning—deductive and inductive

There are two types of reasoning processes, and they both require us to ask a progressive series of questions.

Deductive reasoning obliges us to work logically through a series of steps towards an inevitable end point, seeking to arrive at hard facts or knowledge. Wisdom, especially *prudential wisdom* (see Chapter One) can be found using deductive reasoning. We can use deductive reasoning to analyse the events in our lives and to extract a broadly applicable conclusion. An example might be: ‘Every time I sit near a cat I get itchy. Therefore I must be allergic to cats.’

In contrast, *inductive reasoning* requires us to make a series of intuitive leaps, asking speculative second questions that take us towards a world of possibility. It can lead us to the most brilliant insights and ideas, but it can also trip us up. We are using hypothesis and speculation to discover new possibilities, but our insights are far more likely to be flawed. For example, we might think, ‘If I get in to work earlier, then I will be able to leave earlier.’ We reason that the earlier we start, the earlier we will finish. This may or may not be true!

Second questions can be used as part of both deductive and inductive processes. They can pull new information from left field to assist in a deductive train of thought, but more often they will be seen as an integral part of an intuitive leap forwards. Weather forecasts are classic examples of inductive reasoning, where the forecasters review all of the available facts and make bold predictions based on them. They will have asked themselves a series of thought-provoking questions based on the patterns and trends that they see. They seem authoritative and wise, but sometimes it can appear to be just guesswork.

In fact, *guessing* is simply an extreme example of desperately speculative inductive reasoning where we attempt to predict outcomes based on little or no valid information.

Faulty inductive reasoning is rife in both casinos and at the races. It is also rife among speculators on the share market, which just shows how strongly we can hold to the apparent validity of a firm belief in defiance of logic. There is a fine line between a wise person and a fool!

When inductive reasoning goes well, however, wonderful things happen. Detectives make spectacular leaps to solve crimes and traders on Wall Street correctly anticipate share price fluctuations. They cannot *know* what will happen, but they do know what *has* happened and they can make connections based on their experience. They seem *wise* and we admire them for it.

Inductive reasoning requires us to create a general truth to help guide our logic. It has to be a *best fit* assumption, and we will never know for sure that it is true. However, it opens the door to potential solutions, and it frees us up from the facts.

To do this, we need to become more aware of the general rules and themes on which we base our leaps of faith. It's not just a 'gut feeling' or intuition that drives us. There are underlying assumptions that drive our decisions. To manage ourselves well in uncertain situations we need to know what we believe in. At times like these, facts are not enough.

Intuitive thinking

Intuitive thinking is best described as part of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), one of the most popular personality assessment tools that is currently available. Initially designed by Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother Katharine Briggs, it is based on a Jungian model of personality type. It has spawned many variants, but essentially it identifies four dichotomies that define personality type: Introversion/Extraversion, Intuitive/Sensing, Thinking/Feeling, and Perceiving/Judging.

It is not the purpose of this book to launch into a major review of the Myers–Briggs theory, but it is of great interest here for us to consider just one of the four dichotomies: the *intuitive world view* versus the *sensing world view*. This dichotomy highlights the role of big-picture thinking in life, in contrast to a focus on practical details.

Sensing types see the world as it is. They prefer to deal in facts and they use their five senses to seek information. They focus on background knowledge and tradition. They are very practical people.

Conversely, *intuitive* types see future possibilities and ideas. They prefer to look ahead and seek connections between things. They use a sixth sense to access what is not actually present and will follow a *hunch* in search of a solution. They inhabit the big-picture world of ideas and concepts.

Intuitive types with a passion for 'things' will be drawn to conceptual ideas which use logic to think outside the square. Intuitive types who love 'feelings' will be drawn to inspiration and expansive visions. The common theme is that all intuitive types look beyond the present facts and practical challenges, and see something compelling ahead of them.

Sensing types can see intuitive types as wistful dreamers, while intuitive types see sensing types as pedantic and dull. In reality, we all need a balance of both, regardless of a personal tendency toward one style or the other. The goal of this book is very much to encourage *intuitive thinking*, in that insight and 'aha' moments only really occur when we are in this space.

The MBTI offers a number of practical techniques for encouraging intuition:

- Start looking for 'patterns' and connections between events.
- Encourage 'flights of ideas'.

- Ask yourself what something reminds you of.
- Ask more questions beginning with 'if'.
- Play word association games.
- Encourage fantasy and daydreams.
- Use metaphor.
- Explore your creativity.
- Speculate more about future possibilities.
- Make decisions based on 'gut feelings' rather than logic.
- Encourage your imagination.
- Develop an interest in abstract art and poetry.

All of the above suggestions can easily be translated into second questions such as:

- What is your gut feeling about this?
- If the barriers to change came down, how do you imagine your world would look?
- What is the pattern here?
- What does this remind you of?

Intuitive thinkers love problem solving. They love to gnaw away at conceptual issues. They like change, surprise and innovation. They love the 'aha' moments that come from making intuitive leaps.

Abstract versus concrete thinking

All thinking can be divided into two types: abstract and concrete. *Concrete thinkers* live in the objective world of practical facts and tangible things. *Abstract thinkers* use concepts rather than facts and generalise away from the information in front of them to consider broader principles and ideas.

Most planning or design work involves abstract thought. We ask 'what might be?' But then the implementation or actual creation requires concrete thinking skills. This is the essential difference between *builders* and *architects* in their complementary approaches to building a house.

When we reflect upon our lives and who we are, it is useful to adopt the perspective of a big-picture planner or designer and ask the kind of questions that they might ask. 'Who am I?' does not require the answer of 'A 40-year-old Caucasian mother of two'. Instead, the question needs to lift us from simple facts to find a more abstract and telling definition. 'I am a determined campaigner for social justice' or 'I am the heart of my family' are examples of simple personal statements that people have shared with me recently. Both descriptions involve abstraction from facts and both give strong messages about personal values.

Abstract concepts are the cornerstone of the creative arts. Abstract art typically requires the observer to 'see' things beyond the canvas. We are invited to abstract our own meaning from the work. We are looking outside the square and are thinking more expansively about what we see. It's a great place to find insight.

Similarly, we are often told that 'it's not what's on the lines, but between the lines' that is important in a written message. Don't take the message at face value. Often it's not what is said but what is not said that is the crucial information.

For example, the most evocative aspects of great movies are the scenes that fade to grey, leaving us to use our imagination to come up with an ending based on what has gone before. Conversely, movies

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